

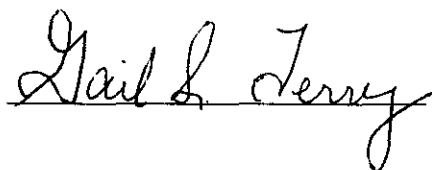
# Becoming My Own Me

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Thesis Advisor:  
Dr. Gail Terry

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gail L. Terry". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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# Becoming My Own Me

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to give a huge THANK YOU to Dr. Gail Terry, who not only inspired the idea of this work but helped me create it into a workable project. By giving me a sounding board for my ideas and problems with my family, she provided me with a positive opportunity to vent my frustrations. Without her help, I'd probably still be trying to figure out what exactly my family is, let alone where I fit into it. Thank you Dr. Terry for all of your hard work and understanding.

## Abstract

This memoir originated from a final project in Honors 199, where we had to write a letter to a family member who could be considered the black sheep and who was kicked out of the family long ago. As the letter evolved into the memoir, it became a way for me to examine some of my family's demons, quirks, and the strain I was feeling at being in between my family's expectations and my own. This thesis explains my family's views on holidays, interpersonal relationships, pets, memories and how we refuse to deal with them. These chapters show a daughter's difficulty in growing up and becoming her own functioning person in light of a dysfunctional and unhappy family.

## Foreword

This memoir originated in a final project for Honors 199 in which we had to write a letter to a family member who could be considered the black sheep and who had been kicked out of the family long ago. In this letter we were to catch the missing member up on the family situation. After discussing several aspects of my family with my 199 professor, who eventually became my thesis advisor, I decided to explore some of my family's difficulties further and develop them into a chaptered thesis. My thesis is modeled after several different memoirs and books based on family that I read during my Honors 199 experience and during my lifetime.

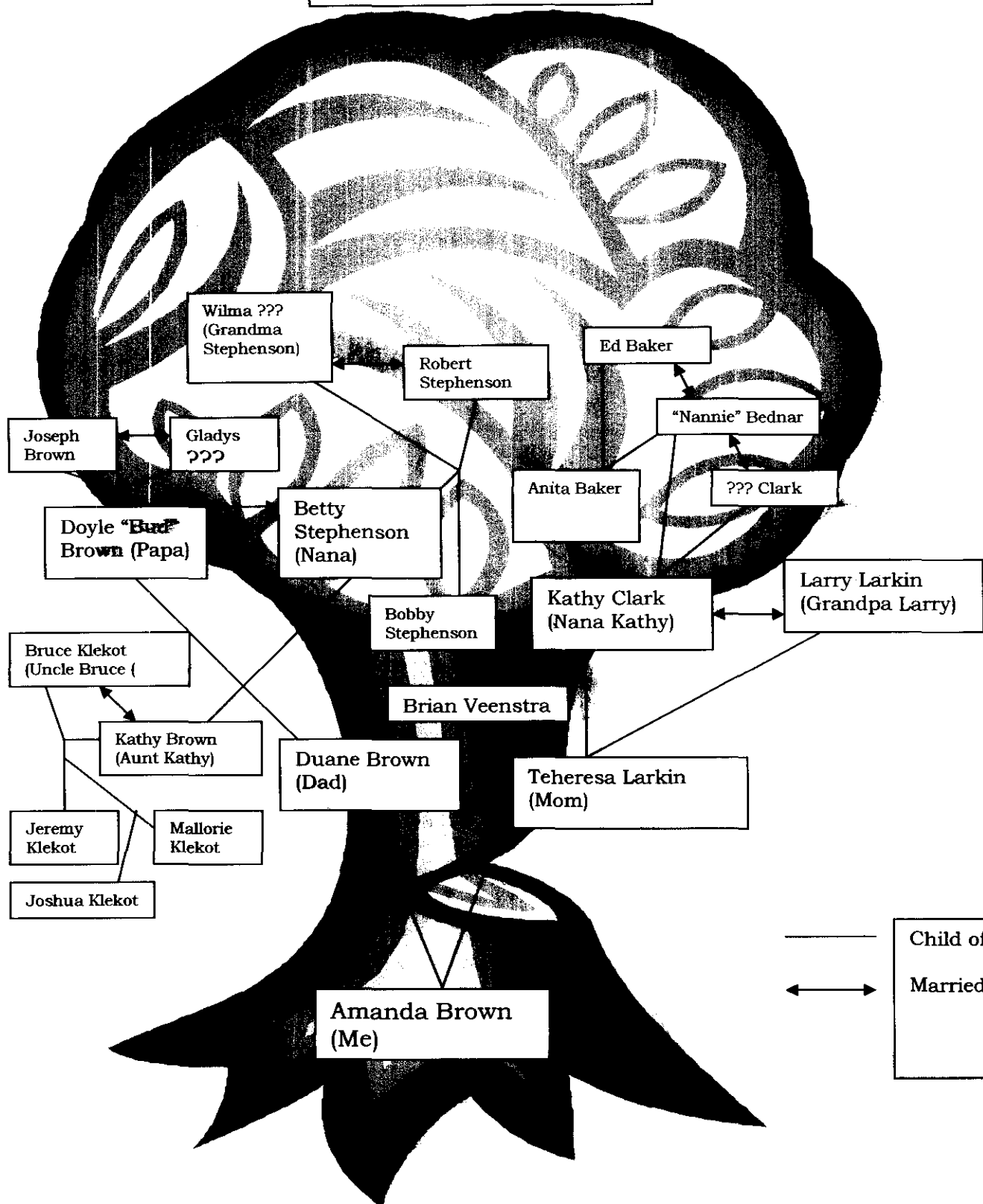
Throughout Honors 199, we read books that examined families and their traits and common occurrences; John Gillis's A World of Their Own Making and Elizabeth Stone's Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins both examine different aspects of the family identity. These books helped add context to the class and to my memoir.

These are not the only works which helped me shape my ideas for this memoir. In addition to Gillis and Stone, we had to read a published memoir and present the book to the class. These presentations introduced me to two memoirs whose influences can be seen in my own memoir, Mary Karr's The Liar's Club, Florence King's Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady. Other influences can be seen from several other

memoirs I have read, such as Alexandra Fuller's Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight, Rita Rudner's Naked beneath My Clothes, and David Sedaris's Me Talk Pretty One Day. These memoirs all present a bit of truth with a grain of salt (sometimes they give you a whole salt shaker); I believe that I was able to present my family in the same way these authors did their own.

What I ask you to realize as you read this memoir is that writing this work became a way for me to examine some of my family's demons, quirks, and the strain I was feeling at being in between my family's expectations and my own. This thesis explains my family's views on holidays, interpersonal relationships, pets, memories and how we refuse to deal with them. These chapters show a daughter's difficulty in growing up and becoming her own functioning person in light of a dysfunctional and unhappy family. I hope you enjoy reading this much more than I occasionally enjoyed living it.

# Family Tree



— This illustration of my family roots says a great deal about my relationship with my family. I chose this picture because as I will state several times in my thesis, I'm trying to separate myself from my family and some traditions and start a new page that will look quite different for my children. That's why there are the beginnings of the axe mark in the trunk of the tree.

— The second most important aspect of my "family tree" is the fact that it's not complete. The members with the bigger font are the members that have had the most direct influence in my life. After I get past my grandparents, I don't know much about that part of my family; although it interests me, it hasn't influenced me in the ways I address in my memoir. To me, a discussion of the other relatives and siblings of my grandparents would be extraneous--information that I don't know and that, as a reader, you don't need to know, to understand my family dynamic. The family that matters most to me is shown on the tree.

— I do not want to send the wrong message and have you as my reader think that family isn't important and that it doesn't matter; it matters a great deal and has shaped who I am today. As you will see, I'm just attempting to figure out who exactly I am now as a result of my family's influence and who I want to become.



## That Time of the Year

# That Time of the Year

When trying to think of what I wanted to title this section, I came up with several less than wonderful, yet very accurate, ideas:

- Family Time is Best Spent Apart
- Happy Holidays: The World's Biggest Oxymoron
- All I Want for Christmas Is To Be Left Alone
- Scrooge Reborn
- Santa Hates Me
- Thanks-giving for the Three Hour Drive
- It's the Most Blunderful Time of the Year
- Happy Horrordays
- If Santa belonged to my family, his reindeer would be named after George Carlin's "7 Words You Can Never Say on Television"

While they may make me laugh and grimace at the same time, I doubt that most people would understand the significance of their meanings unless they belonged to a family like mine. In fact, I think the holiday season is probably the best way to introduce someone to my family because it epitomizes who we are and are not.

There is nothing that I hate more than the holiday season with the possible exception of the birthday song. (yet another family time that I despise). Thanksgiving is typically the beginning of my Holiday hell. We

usually spend it at my aunt's house with my grandma, my aunt, uncle and their three kids, and my uncle's parents and brothers. It's in my aunt's freezing basement, and my cousins disperse themselves about the house in hopes to hide until the food's done. My grandma sits on one of the old couches and complains nonstop to my dad, who is tuning her out and eating the whole bowl of nut mix (and then later denies doing so). My mom flits about, doing a bunch of nothing, looking like she doesn't feel she fits in...which she doesn't because she has some remnant of sanity in her head. My aunt spends a lot of time "cooking" (although due to recent developments, I think she may be hiding away with an excess of liquor as opposed to cooking.) My uncle and his family sit at the poker tables talking and whining because, like my family, it is what they do best. I hop about trying to avoid any conversation and trying to appear sociable. It's quite a tricky activity and one that I've been practicing since I was about 10.

My dad hates Thanksgiving for the above things. It's a pointless get together that no one wants to do. In fact, he hates anything that becomes a family affair (and he wonders where I get it from). The only time I have seen him happy at the prospect of Thanksgiving is when we started talking about Thanksgiving 2002 and my apartment.

"If I don't have to go to your Aunt's, I'll pay for you to cook it. HELL, I'll pay for it to be catered."

And so, it was decided. I would have Thanksgiving for my parents and me. I wouldn't have to drive three hours for something that I didn't want to go to, and my parents would drive three hours to eat a steak dinner. And all was good for close to a year...until I came up with a "brilliant" idea. My parents and my boyfriend's parents hadn't met yet, and by Thanksgiving 2002, we would have been dating for nine months. In September, I started batting around the idea that maybe I should invite his parents down as well. By the end of the month, I had asked his mom if they would like to join us. And she said yes.

I won't lie; a part of me really hoped that they'd say no, because it'd just make everything so much more stressful to have them there. If they had said no, then my effort in trying to be a good possible future daughter-in-law was done, and Travis would have to come up with the next good idea (and of course, if everything went bad with that, then I could blame him, and I would not be culpable.) But, I did feel a bit of relief when it was decided that they would come down because the first meeting of the parents is stressful, and I just wanted to get it over with. Eventually, I was getting excited about the whole idea. Of course, once the sun starts shining, something has to happen... like a bird will crap on your head. Let me introduce you to the pigeon, my mom.

My parents were less than ecstatic. When I first told Mom, her reaction was far from what I had hoped. I can't quite place the emotion I heard in her voice, but it wasn't good. When she told my dad, his

reaction was worse. He got upset about the fact that it was turning into a family event, the exact thing he was trying to get away from. My mom also added that he felt like it was going to be like meeting the in-laws, which meant that my boyfriend and I were really serious. *Well, great, I thought, this is going to be one huge disaster. I've done it again.* It got worse once I talked to my grandma.

My grandmother is the harbinger of worry and stress. I should have known better than to call her. All I had wanted was the recipe for sweet potatoes. Well, I got that, and a bit more. My heart dropped when she told me how my mom acted when Thanksgiving got brought up at her house.

"Well, did she tell you everything?" (insert unhappy pause here)  
"She invited Travis's parents."

Well, gee, mom, thanks for backing me up here! I knew that she was hesitant, but I didn't know that she was unhappy about it. I told my grandma that this made me worry even more, and she said something that at the time seemed to be out of character.

"You know what? It's your Thanksgiving. You're cooking it, it's at your house, and you can invite whoever you want. If they have a problem with it, they can just deal with it." I thought at the time my grandma's unspoken words were, "They should be supporting you here, because I am." Except now I think that she told me that because she knew I could and would say it if I needed to, which was something that

my grandma could never do. I wonder if she was just telling me something that she had wanted to say all of her life.

And I decided that she was right. So, I told my mom essentially the same thing when I talked to her next. She didn't admit her reservations about the whole thing, but I think she began to realize exactly how important it was to me.

The worst part of Thanksgiving ended up being that I had to pay for the whole thing. Naturally, my dad's offer to pay for it no longer stood, Travis was broker than I was, and I certainly wouldn't have accepted a penny from his parents. So I spent quite a bit of money trying to buy all the ingredients to make everything myself. I condescended to let my mom make green beans and tuna pasta salad and his mom taffy apple salad, but I think this was mainly because I knew they could do it better than I could...that, and it was an important part of the holiday negotiations. I think his mother would have been offended had I not wanted her to bring anything. (and my mom would have been offended if she hadn't been asked to bring anything and his mom had.)

The next worst part was the cleaning. Not only would this be the first time his parents would meet mine, but it would be the first time they would be coming to my apartment and get an idea of my family. We're slobs and we border on white trash, but I don't want his parents to know this. Drama erupted when I spent the day before Thanksgiving cleaning for nearly twelve hours and Travis slept on the couch for four,

and just cleaned the stove and took out trash. I wasn't a happy pumpkin pie cooker Wednesday night, but I had to put on a happy face because that night the family came over.

My parents reached Muncie before his parents. My dad stayed at the hotel (no big surprise or change from behavior there) and my mom brought their dog over. Just after I ordered Chinese food for Travis and me on my mom's buck, his parents called to see if we wanted pizza. Typical chain of events.

His parents brought pizza for them and ate over at my apartment. My mom stayed long enough to meet his parents (which I was thankful for). Travis's sister stayed with me that night so we could hang out some. In reality, Travis and Leslie hung out, and I was just there. I was really rather annoyed because I was trying to make an effort to get to know her, but Travis and Leslie are close, so I became a third wheel.

Surprisingly, everything on Thanksgiving Day turned out a lot better than the preparations had. Our parents got along well enough so that there wasn't any drama during dinner, and my dad and I ganged up on my mom and harassed her, which is about the only fun family tradition we have. The biggest drama was the turkey. The bastards cooked for five hours, and they were just two breasts! Luckily, I tried to plan for this possibility and put them in at around 9:00am. I had wanted to eat between 2:00 and 3:00, and one of the breasts was done at 2:30. The other decided to not be done until about 3:15, so my dad and I

ate cold food. He and I bonded while waiting for the turkey to be done, and it was probably one of the best hours that I had spent with my dad in a long time.

Travis's mom told him to thank me, and tell me that everything was really good every time he talked to her that following week. I even got a card from my mom telling me that she had enjoyed it, and that the food was very good. I have a suspicion that the card from Mom was an effort to repair any damage from before Thanksgiving, but I'll take what I can get, no matter the reason.

And so my first adult attempt at a family function was a success. Next year, Dad says we're going to Daytona Beach. I'm assuming that Travis's family isn't invited... ☺. But that's okay with me. I'm ready for a holiday break!

\* \* \* \* \*

In Honors 199, we got into a discussion about Christmas that stemmed from John Gillis's book, A Family of Their Own Making. I was one of the few upperclassmen in the class, and the rest consisted of fairly sheltered freshmen (okay, maybe I can only make that statement referring to the outspoken ones, but let's just pretend). I hate talking about Christmas because I feel ashamed of how little it means to my family. It doesn't have a religious significance. In fact, the only reason why the nativity is anywhere in my house is because I was Mary in my second grade Christmas play and my mom thinks it's cute to remind me



constantly of this fact. So, when I was confronted in class with the self-appointed task of opening up these innocent kids eyes to the horrors of my Christmas. . . .

“Let me tell you guys about my holiday season. We spend as little time as possible at my grandma’s. We complain all Christmas morning because we have to go. We get crappy presents, and on the way home, we thank GOD that we don’t have to go again for another year.”

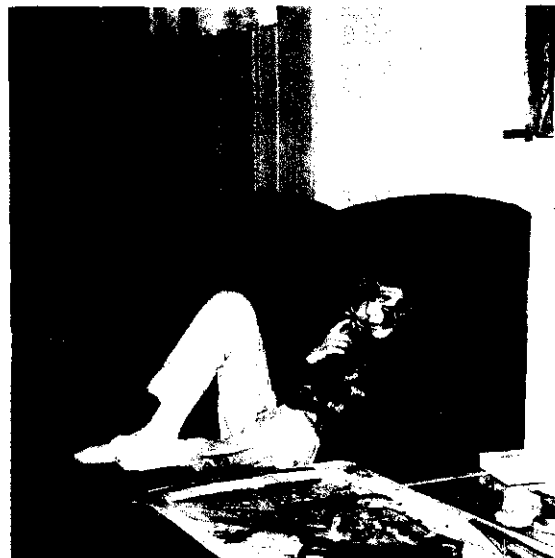
A few other students spoke up about how their Christmas experience wasn’t completely dancing sugar plums and smiles when one of the outspoken girls raised her hand and sounded near tears. “I am so upset about this. You guys don’t even know the true meaning of Christmas. We spend our Christmas reading from the Bible, celebrating the spirit of the holidays, and enjoying our family. You just have it all wrong!”

First off, honey, it is not a good idea to insinuate that your classmates’ families’ traditions are “wrong”. It will not win you any friends, and it makes you look foolish. Secondly, yay for you for having a family that can get along and actually like each other. However, not everyone is as fortunate, and it’s something that you need to realize and learn how to be tactful about. Thirdly... well, there is no third item, but I’m still upset about her comment and felt like there should have been more on the list.

I'm upset because I don't like feeling like I'm a bad person for having a family that doesn't like each other or enjoy spending time together, and that's the reaction I had to her comment. I felt like she was taunting, "my family is better than your family". Honestly, it pissed me off. I may not like spending time with them, but I'm protective of them, and if anyone is going to make fun of them or call them out on their imperfections, it better not be someone who is outside of my family. We may not like eat other, but the only ones that can badmouth the family are other family members.



(from left to right: Aunt Kathy, Papa, me, Nana, Dad).  
The expressions on everyone's face should explain everything about how my family enjoys get-togethers. Don't we look thrilled?



The bows were my idea. I wasn't happy about the picture being taken, and I especially wasn't happy about getting to go to Nana's later that day for Christmas.



Look at these two pictures. You are witnessing a young girl figuring out there was no such thing as Santa Claus. "Santa" had brought me the Teddy Ruxpin, and Mom and Dad had gotten me a cassette for him. About five minutes after that second picture, I asked my mom how she knew I was getting a Teddy Ruxpin; she said that Santa had called and told them. Even to my six or seven year old mind that sounded suspicious....

It's Like A Dark Secret

## It's Like A Dark Secret

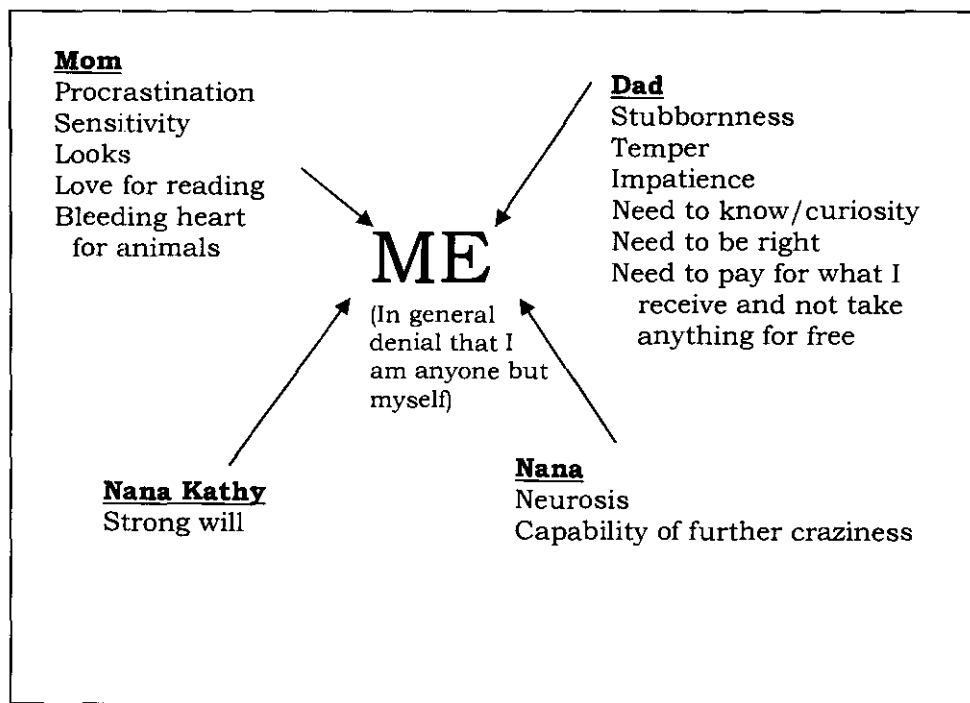
Family togetherness scares me. Well, no, let me rephrase that. It terrifies me. It's as if I'm some Soviet spy in a U.S. Senate meeting in the McCarthy Era. That's how out of place I feel when family is brought up. My heart starts racing, my palms get sweaty...I literally start to freak. I just wait to be exposed for the family fraud that I am.

Now, you're probably slightly amused by this, but honestly, it's not so funny. My lack of ability to enjoy family time. . . well, I'm ashamed of it sometimes. My family is based on avoidance and bitching. Values schmalues. We want to spend as little time as possible together. We love each other because we have to. Deep down though, the problem we don't want to admit is that we really don't like each other. It's ironic because each generation has so molded the following generation into the neurotic and/or angry mass that exists in the Brown clan today.

My anxiety gets even worse when I'm surrounded by church people. I have serious problems with many organized religions that relate to my problems with family because I rebel against absolutist theories (though not always deliberately). Just like my dad, I don't like hearing I'm wrong for my thoughts and opinions. And because I wasn't raised in a religious household or with much religious background, my opinions are usually very different from those of any church.

Well, as a reader of my innermost thoughts, you have probably also figured out that the problem I have with "church people" is much

more superficial than just religious dogma. Families who have strong foundations in religion are usually portrayed as having stronger family ties. And this is what makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to be looked down on by people for my "atypical" family. If I'm going to be looked down on, I'd rather it be for something that I have control over. But a person's ties to his or her family always seem to be accepted as saying something about that person. Well what does my family say about me to strangers? That I'm crazy? Not able to play well with others? Bound to be a crotchety old woman with few friends?



The Sum of All Me

I'll admit that those two qualities describe me part of the time...hell, they describe everyone at one point or another. I like to think that I'm not psychotic and disagreeable a majority of the time. However,

these are the qualities that come out in me when my family is around, or at least their potential can be seen clearly. They aren't ME! I don't know why I think that church people wouldn't be able to differentiate between my family and me. It's not like they're alien or don't have their own family problems.

I think it'll be clearer if I use a TV stereotype of church families to explain. Take Seventh Heaven. The father is a preacher and even though his family goes through troubles, they all still manage to be able to say "I love you" and mean it in every sense of the word. However, at the end of the day they also like each other as people, deep down. Now, take my family. I don't like my dad, and my mom's family doesn't really like him either. My dad is uncomfortable around my mom's family. Nana doesn't really like my mom and doesn't really like my dad. Everyone is getting to not like my aunt because she's become an alcoholic and isn't very nice to my cousins. I don't know my cousins well enough to not like them, but they do annoy me, as nearly all younger children do. When any member of my family has a problem, we do not settle it with a family discussion and work through it that way. We let the problem fester and gossip about it to the other family members, who keep their mouths closed. When we say "I love you" I really think there's an invisible "but I don't really care to spend time with you at all" attached to the end of the statement.

As I write this (and probably my entire memoir), I feel like I'm exposing some dark secret that never was meant to be exposed. I half expect my dead relatives to knock me over with some lightning bolts from the clouds above (assuming that God could tolerate my family enough to let them up there). By acknowledging what I just did, I'm in essence betraying my family because it's something we're all ashamed of and never want to discuss. Again, guilt in action in my family. We know it's not "normal" to feel this way...it's almost unnatural to have such an aversion that isn't based on any traumatic event in our family life. We plain don't like each other just because. But we can't say anything about it because it would make us bad people.

About three years ago, when I was nineteen or twenty my parents and I were getting ready to head over to Nana's. I was sitting on the couch, Dad was in the recliner, and Mom was being slow as usual. The TV was on, but all I could think about was that we had to go Nana's house. I had been dreading it, and I knew I wasn't alone. So I decided to speak my thoughts, not knowing that it was something I wasn't supposed to do that day, even to those who had expressed similar feelings less than five minutes earlier.

"I don't know if I can make it through Nana's. She's so crazy, and I'm so tired of her 'woe is me' attitude. I just can't stand it."

I was fully expecting my dad to agree with me and add his two cents; the only time my dad and I agree is when we are complaining



about Nana or making fun of Mom. God only knows what had gotten into my dad that day because I got a lecture instead of an agreement.

“Amanda, you shouldn’t talk that way about your grandmother. I should never have said anything about when I get frustrated with her... It’s my fault. I don’t want to hear you say anything like that again.”

I was completely flabbergasted. It would have been a different story had it been the first time that I had expressed these feelings of animosity towards a family member, my grandmother in particular. But this was something that had been said in one form or another for several years. I wanted to tell him that, along with the fact that I was an adult (or a fairly close approximation) and that I could have my own opinions and just because they were similar to his doesn’t mean that I took his opinions and made them my own. But instead I acknowledged to myself that some weird voodoo was going on in my house and that I should just keep my mouth quiet. So I just sat there in a semi-stunned silence until it was time to get into the car and argue like we usually do.

Looking back at the situation, I understand a little bit more about why Dad had the reaction he did (although it would have been more appropriate earlier in my life). Maybe it’s because of the perspective I have on my family that has been stuck in my mind since I’ve been writing this chapter, but I think that he felt guilty and disappointed that I was turning out to be as much a family scrooge as he was. But there’s a bright side to being a second generation hum-bugger. I don’t want to

continue along the same path as the rest of my family. When I have my own family in my own household (far away from my family and my husband's) I want to create a happy atmosphere. I am determined to start new family traditions. I want a family that smiles at each other not out of malice or duty but because we actually like each other. What a scary and foreign concept...



(from left to right: me, Dad, Nana Kathy)  
This picture was taken before Nana Kathy was going back to Virginia just after my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. This picture is amusing to me now because there's tension between every person pictured here, and things aren't really as happy as they may seem. (1988)



Nana Kathy  
(1960s)



(from left to right: Grandma Stephenson, Aunt Kathy, Jeremy, Nana, and Mom) Grandma Stephenson was the matriarch of the family. She was one of the most ornery people I've ever met. (1986)



(from left to right: Aunt Kathy, Nana)  
Everyone is thrilled to be around each other.

## FIRE DEPARTMENT

EAST CHICAGO, INDIANA  
DR. JOHN B. NICOSIA, Mayor

LAWRENCE LARKIN	
Name	7543 HOMERIDE
Address	Lawrence Larkin
Signature	Charles Larkin
Fire Chief	



Grandpa Larry's ECFD identity card. This would make about the fifth time I've seen him in my life because he didn't feel that it was important to keep in touch. He and my father did not get along, and my mom and I paid for it.

## Daddy's Demon

# Daddy's Demon

Scene: The backroom of a small, unkempt house in Gary, IN.  
Approximately 10pm, January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Two days before I am to leave the States and study in France for four months. Dad standing in his tidy-whities, I at the computer.

“Because you don’t clean your room after I ask you time and time again, you don’t respect me. A good daughter respects her parents. All I ask is that you clean your room! That is all I ask of you!” (editorial of script by director: **stupid comment #1**)

“I’m a horrible daughter because I’m messy? For God sakes, Dad, I graduated second in my class with a 4.6 GPA, I have a 3.8 in college. I never had a detention, never did drugs, never been in any trouble. And I’m a horrible daughter? That’s a load of bullshit.”

If you can imagine my exasperation at this whole argument up as high as it can go, then you haven’t quite imagined the level of emotion I was at...but you are close. His words hurt, but they just seemed too ridiculous to be coming out of a grown man’s mouth....and then....

“I never asked you to do those things. I just asked you to clean your room.” (director’s comment: **stupid comment #2**)

“You wanted me to play little league when I was little, made me feel like shit because I didn’t. So I get into high school, I play three seasons of volleyball, a season of softball, two seasons of tennis to please you.

And you were never there to support me. Maybe you should think about how good of a father you are.”

“It’s not my job as a father to be there. I am supposed to be there financially. And why should I go to your games? You never want to go to any of the things I’m involved in.” (director’s comment: **stupid comment #3, selfish comment #314**)

“There is a big difference between going to a two hour game and an all day drag race where I don’t have anywhere to go or anyone to talk to.”

“I don’t see any difference at all” (director’s comment: **stupid comment #...oh hell, I quit trying to keep track.** Does it even matter at this point? These sentences were coming out of the mouth of a thirteen year old “man”...a father speaking to his daughter the way a jealous older brother would...if Charlie Brown were a member of my family, his line would be, “I can’t stand it. I just can’t stand it.”)

or how about my current second favorite Dad memory:

Picture it, Gary, Indiana, Tuesday, Aug 18, 11:02 am. Two days before I am to leave for my freshmen year at BSU. I am sitting in my bedroom on the telephone. My parents are in the driveway, arguing. Enter Dad.

“Well, kiddo, I’m leaving. I don’t know when I’ll be back. If I’m not back before you leave, have a good time and be careful.” Gives me a hug.

Exit Dad.

Merrillville, Indiana, same day, five and a half hours later. Both my parents and I are at Sam's Club shopping for a small fridge, microwave and anything else I might need for the upcoming school year. Insert satirical Brady Bunch music in the background...

I don't think that I need to explain that my dad and I have had a rough relationship. Nor should I have to explain that it has deeply affected my relationships with people, especially males. The group that I hung around with in high school was primarily made up of guys; in fact, these are the only people I have kept in contact with since graduation. And I cannot even begin to list the insecurities that I have in a relationship, though I'm sure you could guess that I never really feel that I deserve whomever I'm with...just as I've been made to feel like I didn't deserve much of the affection that I got.

The month of January before I left for France, the time of the first sample dialogue, I was a wreck. By my best estimate, I think I left the house about five times in the entire month...and even then I had to practically be forced to leave. I lost about twelve pounds. I spent my days in and out of sleep on the couch with the phone no more than an arm's reach away, and my nights on the couch awake until 6:00-8:00 am unable to sleep. When I did sleep I'd suffer from horrible nightmares; so naturally I hated sleeping as much as I hated being awake. When I wasn't sleeping, I'd check the phone constantly to make sure I still had a dial tone. All for an ex, who had technically dumped me the August

before and strung me along until the end of December. And then the aforementioned argument with my father happened. This is the condition I left for France in.

I spent the next three of the four months I was there unable to sleep at night, devouring any book in English I could find, spending from 7pm until 3 am on the computer trying to talk to my friends back here in the States. And as bad as it was, as much as I wanted to be home, to have my mom there (which my dad wouldn't allow), as much as I wanted to die, being there, away from everything (especially away from any chance I had of being able to drive to my ex and call him or do whatever I could to see him, whether or not if he wanted to see me) it was the absolute best thing I could have done. I was forced to deal with the break up in a way I wouldn't have had the chance to if I had remained home; I was forced to face everything that was wrong with him, wrong with me, with us.

I don't know if I would have made it past that point in my life if I hadn't been away. Nearly two years later I still have dreams about my ex, and they affect me so horribly that I'm afraid to go to sleep the next night because I DO NOT want to have the dream again. To sound extremely clichéd, I was wounded heart, body, and soul from that relationship with a person who in many ways was a great deal like my father. And just like I have done in the past with Dad, I yearned for any way to make my ex happy with me, whether it made me happy or not.



Somehow, I managed to become a stronger person after the end of that third month in France. One day, I woke up, and I just had confidence in myself again, for the first time in over six months. I could smile and laugh without a part of me still wanting to cry horribly. I had finally and suddenly arisen out of my depression. Except that stress and life continue, and that with me, there will always be something that I feel is dragging me down.

I think that not getting along well with your father is a family tradition. A bad temper runs on my dad's side of the family. My dad and Papa used to butt heads constantly, in a time where if you hit your kid, it was unequivocally your child's fault. One time everything got so physical between them that Nana threatened to call the cops. In fact, she may have. And if I had been born a male, it would have been the same situation with my father and me. There were many times when I wanted nothing more than to punch him or to take one of those kitchen knives and make him feel the pain he placed inside me. But unlike my dad, I couldn't and wouldn't fight back. In the grand scheme of things, I'm a weakling and my dad's made of stone.

My dad and Papa took a long time to start getting close, and just as they started forming the relationship they both wanted, Papa died of a heart attack. My dad has taken it really hard, and for a while he tried to do stuff for Papa's memory (hence, the race car and the dedication to

Papa on the trunk). I think that someday he'll look back and regret how things turned out between us. I hope I don't.

There isn't a song that exists that better explains how I felt growing up in middle and high school than "I'm Okay" written by Christina Aguilera and Linda Perry (Stripped, RCA. USA, 2002). There may have not been physical abuse in my house, but I always felt that the threat could have been there when my dad exploded. Even without physical abuse being present, I grew up with an abusive father. What this song does for me is take me right back into the fights and the pain that still exists in my heart.

### ***I'm Ok***

*Once upon a time there was a girl  
In her early years she had to learn  
How to grow up living in a war that she called home  
Never knew just where to turn for shelter from the storm  
Hurt me to see the pain cross my mother's face  
Every time my father's fist would put her in her place  
Hearing all the yelling I would cry up in my room  
Hoping it would be over soon*

The fights in my house were explosive. My dad was a ticking time bomb, and even now it still seems like everything I do sets him off. I have clouded most of the events out of my mind, but every lingering feeling of helplessness and anger and hurt still chokes the air out of my soul. I lost nearly all trust and respect for my father as a person the first time he tried to walk out.

The biggest roadblock between us is the fact that we have different ideas of what a father is. In his mind a father's primary responsibility is financial. I can't say that he didn't do what he could to make sure that my mom and I were taken care of financially, because he did, and I remember knowing that I was poor deep down but never actually having to face that reality. The reality that I did have to face was that everyone in my family was miserable. That we had to tip toe on glass to make sure not to put a fissure in the false sense of calm that settled over my house after every fight nearly every night. In my mind, a father doesn't have a primary role, because every role that he has in his child's life is extremely important. Love shouldn't come before money; to my father, love equals money. In his mind he showed me that he loved me by providing for me.

I remember probably about ten years ago during one of the several job crises that he went through, I was in the garage with him, and he was talking about how he could've gone back to school for something and we could be living in Crown Point (which is considered Yuppie/Snob Central). He made sure to stress that he could have sold out and become a yuppie with the large nice house and the backyard bbq's, but he liked middle-class life, he liked working hard for his money. I'm questioning now exactly who he was trying to convince of this fact.

To get back to my focus, a person can have an abusive father who doesn't hit his child. My dad may not have hit us, but there were close

calls. Close, close calls. And I had hoped that things would get easier for my mom once I moved out because most of my parents' problems revolved around me. My mom was the dominant parent; when I had problems, I went to her 100% of the time. When I had good news, I went to her first. Dad and I didn't talk unless we needed to. If he had a problem and didn't feel like picking a fight, he'd tell my mom, "Tell **your** daughter this..." or "**Your** daughter needs to do that...". Always **her** daughter, no joint ownership. In a sense I was only her daughter because I felt like I had a "father", not a "dad"...a male figure in the house, not in my life.

Unfortunately, things weren't better for a couple of years after I left. They still fought nearly exclusively about me. And just because I wasn't there didn't mean that the arguments didn't get heated. Especially one night my sophomore year....

I will give him credit for being able to get his temper into check enough not to hit her. I'm not sure that the furnace deserved being punched, but anything is better than my mom, I guess. I'm not sure exactly what happened. I know they were fighting about me, which was nothing new. I managed to call during the middle of a particularly bad fight (thanks to my wonderful sense of timing), and I think it all escalated because of me. I just remember my mom being in tears on the phone ,and I found out at some point that Dad had gotten so angry that it came down to in his words "having to hit something. It was either your mom

or the furnace...so I hit the furnace.” This action resulted in a broken hand and a touchy uncomfortable topic that just got added to the hundreds of others that we had buried in the backyard.

I only remember one prior event where my dad was remotely violent, and I’ve been scared about him not being able to control himself since then. It was sometime after seventh grade, because everything happened after that point. I blame part of the tension on Christmas Day; everyone was already in a bad mood. On the way home from Nana’s the car broke down. Anytime a car is involved in the drama, you can bet that Dad will go ballistic. To make the matter worse, we were in my grandmother’s Buick. She thought there was something wrong with it (because she naturally finds faults and problems where there usually are none), so she talked Dad into driving it for a few days. (Don’t you love how nearly all the drama in my family revolves around my grandmother and dad? It can always be traced back to one of them...)

My memory of that night is blank until we pulled into an Amoco station. It was so cold outside, and quite frankly it wasn’t all that much warmer on the inside of the car. Whatever was wrong with it, Dad got it fixed after a little while. We finally got home, and I think Dad went out to the garage for a little bit. I was bored, which was not an unusual event when I was stuck at home. I decided that a way to amuse myself and make carrying all my presents into my room easier was to use a tote Dad had gotten that day as a present. I had it about half full when he came

into the house and immediately yelled at me to get the stuff out of there. (I suppose that I should mention the fact that Dad never thinks he yells until it gets to the point where he can't control himself. He's quite delusional if he thinks this because he rarely speaks calmly or even corrects most people in a civil tone. If your face is turning red, you can bet you're yelling, Dad.) He left the room as I was taking everything out, and then, I was struck with what I considered to be the stupidity of it all. What the hell did it matter if I used his tote for ten minutes? I wasn't going to ruin it. I was always a child who needed a reason when told to do or not do something; "just because" was the worst thing you could imply or say if you were trying to get me to do something. (Sadly, I can't say that I have changed all that much.) Seeing as how I was all ready in a fantastic mood, I started piling things back in the tote. Well, unfortunately for everyone in my house, I got caught.

This part of the memory is as vivid as a silent motion picture so that I'm having a hard time remembering that I'm not back at my living room, my dad screaming in my ears. He can't be more than three inches away from my left ear, and although I can't hear him, I know that he's yelling at me to "fucking listen to his god-damn orders" and that he "fucking told me to take the god damned shit out of the fucking box". I can feel his breath rushing in and around my ear, and I'm drenched in tears, my body shaking from hiccups and trying to catch my breath.

I don't know how long she has been standing in the doorway to the kitchen, but I look up at her. I don't know what she is saying...she's probably asking Dad to control his temper. Never ask him to "control" himself; he always thinks he's in control. He will never admit his flaws unless he's feeling remorseful...which is one emotion that he definitely doesn't have at the current moment.

I am still looking at Mom when Dad throws the model box at her. It hits the wall about five inches from her head. I can only make out certain words from what he is telling her. From "fuck you", "Teri", "goddamn child" I know that he's telling her to mind her own business. I can make out one clear sentence. "Do you want to start with me, too?" Mom doesn't try to stand up to him for me again. And as much as I was terrified at that moment the model box almost hit her, I still am hurt that she didn't try more to save me from it on any occasion. This was her one lone stand against Dad, and he successfully quelled any future possibility of it happening again.

Unfortunately, it's impossible for anyone in my family to learn from their mistakes. About two months shy of a year from the point where Dad punched the furnace, we had another family blow out. I can't remember what the fight was about. My memory, as with a lot of them from my childhood, was shot from an outside observer. This was probably the best way for my mind to be able to deal with things.

We are standing in the kitchen. I can see the back of my head, my mom's profile, and my dad's face looming above the two of us. Mouths are moving, but there's no sound until the crack of my dad's knuckles against the freezer door. My dad mentions that his hand hurts, and mom and I decide that we're taking him to the emergency room at the clinic. And once again we become a happy family full of togetherness and fakeness to face the outside world.

What's funny about both of the times Dad broke his knuckles is that every time he goes off the deep end, and almost hurts one of us, that he thinks that he can make everything better by doing the dishes. I'll give him credit, he would also try to keep his temper in check for a while; but what I will always remember about the aftermaths of the broken hand is Dad standing in front of the sink, a plastic bag around his cast, doing dishes. And it doesn't make me respect him for trying to make things better...it makes me lose respect because I think that after everything it is a very superficial attempt at a feeling I think is more guilt than actually being sorry. And I can't respect that. It just makes him and his apologies seem so much more insignificant to me.

*Bruises fade father, but the pain remains the same  
And I still remember how you kept me so afraid  
Strength is my mother for all the love she gave  
Every morning that I wake I look back to yesterday  
And I'm OK*



As I say this, I have to admit that this quality in my dad probably disgusts me so much more because I am the same way. I will blow up at barely any provocation, shout flames from my mouth and my heart, and then once I have said my piece, I am ready to go on as if nothing happened. This is how I've been taught to deal with dilemma when it comes to people close to me. My father and I both end up treating people who aren't close to our hearts with more civility than those who are. I hate it about him, and I hate it about myself. And I hate that I don't know how to change it.

With the exception of Brian, my ex, my dad could tear me down better than anyone. As soon as the first syllable of a negative comment leaves his mouth I burst into tears. I'm his dog, and he's Pavlov, perfecting the conditioned response. In fact by high school I would cry no matter what, whether I was angry or frustrated. Thanks Dad, I appreciate all you've taught me. Of course, the fact that I start to cry as soon as a fight starts just manages to piss him off more, which always makes the situation SO much better. After all the family fights and my desperate unhappiness, by the time I reached middle school, all Dad would have to do was look at me wrong and I would start bawling. And any time I feel an emotion that is one that I experienced when fighting with Dad, I can't do anything but cry. I cry out of frustration, of sadness, of anger, of hopelessness...I cry for just about anything except for good

things, like pride and happiness. I feel so helpless when I can't control my tears.

I hate feeling manipulated, and Dad has manipulated me very well throughout the years. I remember one particular time he was yelling at me I had decided that it was just going to be easier to keep my mouth shut than to fight with him. And seeing that I wasn't going to fight back, he just pushed harder. I finally ran into my room through my typical Trail of Tears and cussed him out behind closed doors. Later when I emerged, he apologized and admitted that he had been trying to pick a fight. What type of person would pick a fight with their child and then admit it to her? It's a good thing that my father is not the typical father figure, because our society would be so much more wonky than it is now.

*I often wonder why I carry all this guilt  
When it's you that helped me put up all these walls I've built  
Shadows stir at night through a crack in the door  
The echo of a broken child screaming please no more  
Daddy, don't you understand the damage you have done  
For you it's just a memory, but for me it still lives on*

Now days my dad and I attempt to pretend that things are ok. We are both aware that it is a fake, tentative truce; but the important part is that we are trying to get along. The fact that I'm three hours away and no longer coming home except about once every four months is allowing this truce to happen. It's a lot easier to remain peaceful when you never talk or see the other person. And I think deep down we are not doing it

for ourselves, but for my mother. She has been caught in the middle, and often times, we end up fighting over her.

Mom tries to play the peacemaker, but my dad and I expect her to choose one of our respective selves over the other on every occasion. And she tries to keep everyone complacent, though Dad and I are impatient and easily anger at not getting what we want. I don't envy her position at all, but I've told her several times that I wouldn't have married him in the first place. ..and that if I were her I'd divorce him with a quickness. I've even tried to convince her to leave him and come live with me here in Muncie. I really just don't understand why she's with him after all of this. If I could kick him out of my life, I would; in order for me to be able to do that, my parents have to be separated because I can't have my mother NOT in my life. On the same stream of thought, I do not want my father to have contact with my children. No, this isn't a scandalous statement. This is a mother wanting to protect her brood. But, again, I don't want my children to not have my mother in their lives. So I just pray that when he does become a grandfather, that he will put more effort into becoming what I want him to be because I don't know what I will do if ever I hear him use the word "nigger" in reference to a black person in front of my kids, or if I ever catch him drunk in front of my children.

Living with my dad has gotten me to fear people whom I think drink too much. They make me incredibly uncomfortable, and I don't

— trust their actions or their mouths. In fact, I'm disgusted by the whole thing. I don't have a problem with drinking occasionally. But I don't think that you need a Miller Light at every meal, and I don't think that you need to be drunk every Thursday through Saturday. And I'm really surprised that my mother doesn't share this feeling more strongly. Her father was an alcoholic, and she's married to a borderline one (and he has a sister who is full-fledged, so it obviously runs in the family!). I guess it's true that women tend to go after men who are like their fathers. The difference between Grandpa Larry, my mom's dad, and my dad is that Grandpa Larry eventually went to Alcoholics Anonymous. I cannot picture my dad ever doing that because to admit that he had that problem would be to admit that he wasn't the man he thought he was. — He knows he drinks...he's just proud of it, where I'm ashamed of my dad and his pony keg belly.

I will give him credit in that he is a lot better than he used to be. When I was little the only cooler that we would have up front during road trips would be Dad's cooler of beer. The best example of his beer quirk would be on one memorable trip back from camping at Willow Slough. We were either in the truck or the 300 and it was hotter than hell outside. No air in the vehicle, and we had vinyl seats; it was hell on earth. I was young, probably under seven years old, and I was THIRSTY. Dad would not stop so that I could get something to drink; my solution was to whine, because since I was an only child, it was one of the things —

I excelled at. His solution? “If you want something to drink, you can have a drink of my beer. Otherwise, go thirsty.” Being naïve and stupid, I decided that drinking the Stroh’s would be better than drinking nothing at all. WRONG! I nearly spit it out in disgust. I had never tasted something so awful in my life, and now not only was I thirsty, but I had the most awful taste in my mouth.

Yes, my dad has no problem with drinking and driving or driving drunk. My favorite phrase that I have heard Mom say relating to this topic was, “Amanda, wake up. We need to get your dad out of jail.” Ah yes, I know the joys of going around to grocery markets trying to cash checks for bail money. I was probably nine at the time, and it was around 3 a.m. I still think that he was lucky that he didn’t marry me because I would have left his ass in Lake County Jail. But he had to be at work the next day, so that wasn’t really an option.

My dad’s response to the whole thing? “The damn cops shouldn’t have sent me to jail because I was two hundredths off. I passed all the other tests. I’m a big man and .10 isn’t that much for a man to have a few drinks. I almost made it; I was almost home...ten more minutes....blah blah blah.”

As you can see, my father has been very responsible throughout the years when it comes to alcohol. One of my favorite examples of my dad’s incomplete sense of responsibility and immaturity is a story that I was told by Nana. I spent an enormous amount of time at my dad’s

— parents when I was young; I was there at least one night a week, every week. I never really thought much about it growing up or even when I got older. I loved being over there because that was where my imagination would flourish. My grandparents had this great staircase with a landing and a perfect railing for me to pretend that it was a podium. I can't tell you how many times I was a church choir leader or a singer at a concert in that stairwell. I had more toys than I knew what to do with, and because I never had anyone to play with over there, I used my imagination 100% of the time. My grandma still brags about how I was able to amuse myself for hours without needing to be guarded over (this sentiment comes, of course, from the fact that my youngest cousin is eventually headed to a juvenile detention center and that my oldest cousin has had his mind absorbed by TV and ghetto rap). I loved visiting Nana and Papa...I just don't love the real reason I'd be over there so much.

— Mr. Irresponsibility, my father, and Ms. Passive, my mother, got married very, very young. To put it into the same words as my mother, I was my father's eighteenth birthday present nine months late. Dad graduated in June, I was born in August, and my parents were married in December. (I was crying so hard while the Justice of the Peace was completing the ceremony that my mom's mom had to take me out in the hallway; I told my mom that I was warning her then to not marry Dad, but she just wouldn't listen to me...) Obviously, my father wasn't going

to be the most matured married eighteen year old. Nor was he the most matured twenty-one year old (or forty-one year old for that matter).

Even though he was married, my dad's authority complex came into play when presented with the idea that he was supposed to clue my mother in on where he was. My dad got off at 3:00pm and by 9:00pm my mother still wouldn't have heard from him. Dad didn't feel like he had to answer to anyone, especially a five foot tall, 100 pound woman with a weak will. So, he simply just wouldn't tell her where he went or when he'd be back; coincidentally, if my mother were to do something like that...well, let's just say the neighborhood could have seen a fantastic fireworks display.

My father's favorite place when I was four or five was the local Home Run Tap; local enough that it was at the end of the street that he grew up on, and where my grandparents lived at this time. When Mom and I would leave Nana and Papa's and we would pass Home Run, I would point it out to Mom and say, "Look Mommy, that's where Daddy likes to go!" Unfortunately, my mom would all ready know for sure he was there. The reason I'd be over at my grandparents most nights was because my mom would ask them to watch me so she could go hunt Dad down. Oh, the joys of marriage....

*Bruises fade father, but the pain remains the same  
And I still remember how you kept me so, so afraid  
Strength is my mother for all the love she gave  
Every morning that I pray I look back to yesterday*

My scariest memories are those with the knife block. I wouldn't call myself suicidal in high school, but I definitely wished I would die. And I can recall several times when I was standing in the kitchen with a knife out of the block or just hugging the block wishing that I would have the strength to follow through. But I know that I never could have done it because I knew what it would do to my mother, and I didn't want to hurt her. I just wanted Dad out of my life, and if it meant that I didn't have to live anymore, that was fine with me. I used to pray for a fatal car accident probably seven out of ten times I would drive by myself. I guess what scares me the most about these instances is that there are still times when I wish that I didn't have to deal with life and wish or pray for the car wreck to come, even now when I'm twenty-two. It happens a lot less often than it used to, but at times of stress or severe PMS problems, it comes back in full force. Since I've been with Travis, I've been a lot more stable and happier overall...but it's still a reality that I have to deal with every few months, and one that I've brought him into because I couldn't keep the silence anymore.

*It's not so easy to forget all the lines you left along her neck  
When I was thrown against cold stairs  
And every day I'm afraid to come home in fear of what I might see next*

High school was probably the time that I wished most that I had an older sibling. I hated going home every day. I dreaded it. I knew what I was in for every night. And so, I did what I could to not be there. The section under my senior picture in my high school yearbook has so



many extra-curricular activities listed that they didn't fit; at this point, only I can translate the abbreviations. I spent an enormous time at my best friend's house, which has been a coping method of mine for as long as I remember. If I can't survive in my own family, I'll just become a member of someone else's.

One would think that summer break would be my antithesis. Luckily for me, summer was my dad's time to shine. I saw him less in the summer than I did at any other point in the school year. Dad always had a car show or a swap meet to go to; and he could never understand why I didn't want to go. The worst time was around my birthday because of the MOPAR Nationals, which was a three day car show/swap meet/drag show always held the weekend around my birthday. Because this became practically a week long event for my family, it always interfered with my birthday. For the first couple of years that my parents went, I went along because I just wanted to be with my parents for my birthday. By the time I reached middle school, I just started staying with my dad's parents for the week; no one can imagine how boring the Nats are to a twelve year old girl.

Not even my sixteenth birthday stopped my dad's pilgrimage to the Nats. That year was a turning point for my tolerance for car shows. My dad fulfilled one of his dreams by staying at the hotel that is located right on the Indianapolis Speedway racetrack. I got my one of my worst nightmares fulfilled because his friends decided that it was a necessity

for waiters to sing me “Happy Birthday” three nights in a row. I can say I spent my sweet sixteen like few others; of course, I can say that with a tightened jaw and an unhappy grimace.

*Bruises fade father but the pain remains the same  
And I still remember how you kept me so afraid  
Strength is my mother for all the love she gave  
Every morning that I wake I look back to yesterday  
And I'm OK  
I'm OK*

I’m okay because I went away to college. I had the choice of going to IUN in Gary on free tuition. Dad offered to pay for my apartment rent (of course, he swore it would be right across the street from the school. Gee, thanks Daddy!) Two years later one of my friends was going to school and saw a shooting victim’s arm hanging out from under the sheet that was covering it. This was right where Dad wanted to put me. (I’m going to ignore the nag in my head saying, ‘wishful thinking’).

Things may have taken a while to calm down (try four years), but once I stopped coming home with any semblance of regularity, the fights between everyone got fewer and less intense. I’m better off and okay because the dark storm cloud that hung over my head for ten years isn’t directly over my head any longer. It’s still just off to my left and still present at all times, but I no longer feel drowned from the torrents of rain coming down straight at me.

Having my father be who he is has taught me how to stand up for myself. Granted, I still have to learn how to keep my mouth and opinions to myself at certain times, but I’m no longer the timid girl who

— doesn't speak up. In some truly screwed up way, my dad's negative dominance in my life gave me strength and confidence where none existed. However, living outside of my father and the tumultuous environment he inhabits has taught me that I have to live outside of my anger as well. And this is incredibly hard for me to do, even though I know how negative anger can be in anything bigger than small doses. I have been taught all my life to live with the fire of temporary hatred in my heart, and it's not something that's easily extinguished. I am working on it. The sun does shine occasionally, and I do smile every day, which is definitely something that I didn't do in high school. One of my closest friends in high school told me that he was voting for me for best smile in our senior awards, but no one else knew because no one ever got to see me smile. That's changed so much that there are some people who have never seen me with anything but a smile on my face. And I think of what my friend told me everyday, because it's a nice comment, but at the same time, doesn't let me forget the melancholy of my previous life.



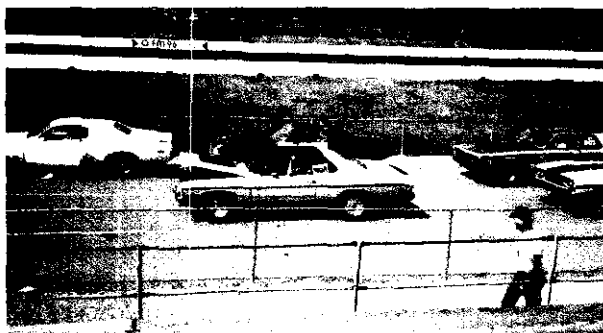
My dad and his metal pride and joys, the 1779 Cordoba, 1979 Chrysler 300, 1964 Barracuda, and Pap's 1966 Barracuda. (early 1990s)



My dad, the 300, and one of the plaques he received from showing the car. (early 1990s)



Dad's 1964 Barracuda, which he turned into a race car and named it "Family Tradition" and dedicated the car to his dad (Papa). (mid 1990s)



A scene from the MOPAR Nationals.



Papa and me. He was more than just my grandpa; he was my second dad.



(left to right: Papa, Nana, me) One of the trips my parents and grandparents went on together. Guess who I hung out with most of the time!



Dad is very jealous of the relationship I have with my mother; she is one of my best friends. (My H.S. Graduation Party, 1998)



I used to be Daddy's girl; puberty and the 90s stopped that quickly.

(Backyard of house in Gary, 1989)



## Family Portraits

## Family Portraits

There is one professional family portrait that I know of in existence. I was somewhere between three to six months old, sitting on my mom's lap with my dad's profile behind us—you know, the classic 80s family portrait. Outside of this picture there are a few pictures of my parents, ones of just my mom and I or my dad and I, but I'm not really sure if there are any other pictures of us as a "family".

As odd as I think it is that there aren't really any pictures, it's not necessarily unusual for my family. We don't take pictures of each other. Take pictures of me, for instance. I'm an only child and was the first born of my family. Normally, that would mean that there would be an abundance of pictures of me wearing silly hats and stupid outfits for the first years of my life. Including the family picture, I know of and have seen five other pictures of me as a baby. I'm quite disappointed about it because I was a chubby little baby, and the pictures that are in existence are quite amusing.

The lack of pictures and my vivid imagination caused me one day to turn to my mom and ask if I was adopted. My reasoning seemed sound to me at the time. I had just read a book where there hadn't been many pictures of this girl and she had found out that the reason why was because she had been adopted. The whole thing sounded rather familiar to me, so I needed to verify whether or not my current idea was true. My mom gave me an absolutely flabbergasted look at my question, and she

told me calmly that she was remembered the pain well enough to be able to be sure that I was her's, and that if she doubted it for a minute, she didn't need to worry because I was the only white baby in the nursery.

I think it would be different if the pictures of me as a baby were quality pictures...but no. The day that the family portrait was taken, the photographer also captured a shot of just me being my butterball little self with my oversized head. All of the other baby pictures of me are just random pictures taken with a Polaroid or cheap camera. There are ones with me sticking my hand in my new training potty (why didn't someone tell me to not do that instead of deciding it was a good photo op?), me dressed up as Raggedy Ann for my first Halloween (coincidentally, I have an extreme aversion to Raggedy Ann, Andy, and any other clown. I blame this costume), a picture of me chillin' on my grandma's stairs, and a picture of the four generations of females in my mom's family. If I hadn't entered school and had pictures taken every year for that, I don't know if I would have had much photographic proof of my existence.

Well, until I received my first camera. Unlike the rest of my family, I am a photo-holic. I have taken so many pointless pictures in the excitement of a moment that it is truly ridiculous. My obsession got worse when One Hour Photo labs were installed in every store. As soon as a roll gets finished, it's off to Walgreen's I go to spend exorbitant amounts of money on one hour doubles. Going near a photo lab is the drug that fixes my addiction.



Where I'm anal about getting my film developed, my mom is notorious for not developing pictures. In 1998 after I returned from my first trip to France and England (ten days gone, twelve rolls of twenty-four exposure film used up) I ended up with dozens of pictures of random buildings. I have no idea what country are in, let alone what exactly they are. I raided the house for undeveloped film rolls before I went to develop the film from that trip; I found four rolls...one of which contained pictures that I had taken during my eighth grade year. Like I said, she's horrible about developing film. But it's not like procrastination and forgetfulness are atypical of my mother, so the lack of developed pictures doesn't really surprise anyone, it's just slightly annoying. This is particularly true for my dad, because he's the one who takes the pictures. Except Dad takes pictures of cars. And more cars. And then maybe a few more pictures of cars. . . because you know, you can never have enough pictures of cars. . .

I was looking through pictures to add to my pile for my memoir, and out of the fourteen stacks of pictures that my parents had in their bedroom and living room, eleven were exclusively of cars. I'll be willing to bet that he hasn't looked at over half of them since the day they got back from being developed. What does he need with all of those pictures of cars? Is he going to make wallpaper out of them? The whole thing makes me laugh because it shows how much of a real people person my

dad is. If only people came with hemi engines for brains, then my dad would truly be sociable.

I do think that the lack of pictures of the family says a great deal about us. We don't want pictures of each other! Generally, you take pictures of people you want to remember, of events that are important, of fun times spent with loved ones. Well, with the way my family tends to feel about each other, especially now that we're all getting older, our loved ones aren't all that "loved", events that should be important don't really have all that much meaning, and "fun times" with loved ones is a big oxymoron for my family. Dad has pictures of cars because that's what he likes.

My mom and I have pictures of our pets. I just developed two rolls of film and about 75% of the pictures were of our two dogs. In fact I have probably more pictures of my dog than I do pictures with me in them. I caught myself being a "mom" the other day, showing around my photos of my dog from the aforementioned rolls of film and saying "Isn't this just the cutest picture ever?" I wanted to puke on myself after I realized what I was doing because I hate those types of moms, and I now know I'm going to definitely be one of them.

I also have impulsive pictures of times spent with friends. For my parents and me, family portraits would just show a fakeness, because we'd have to smile like we got along. Pictures should express truth. So,

— we take pictures of everything but each other, because the truth is, we don't really want to remember certain aspects of each other.



Me with my hands in my training toilet at my first birthday party. Luckily this is a habit I got over.



Me on my grandma's staircase somewhere between 1981 and 1982.



Easter at Nana's. This picture is an excellent example of how disproportionate my big head was to the rest of my tiny body. (somewhere between 1986-1988)

Just Your Regular Circus

## Just Your Regular Circus

I love having my dog sit on my lap, particularly when I'm here at the computer. There's a slight problem with that....my dog is a sixty pound border collie/chow mix. Her rear end is as big as mine, and she's definitely bigger than my lap. So every day that I'm at this contraption, we go through the circus of trying to fit us both into my small computer chair and become a mangled mess of fur, skin, and legs until the both of us are so uncomfortable that we cannot take it any longer and she somehow manages to get down. Yet, we never learn because I love having her near me, and she has to have attention from someone at all times...

Notice I said SOMEONE, not me. My dog prefers strangers to me half the time. If someone comes over, she makes them pay attention to her (she really is like a five or six year old child). ESPECIALLY MALES. I have described her as "an affection whore and an attention slut" because, truthfully, she is. My roommate and I have lost our boyfriends to my dog. I think her boyfriend and my dog would get married if they legally could. If Kevin's over, the two of them have to be touching each other at all times; he's even said hello to my dog on the answering machine. And when my boyfriend comes over, my dog ceases listening to my requests and commands and will only come to visit me if Travis tells her to (I think he enjoys the power trip of it all...it's really just annoying

for me). The only time that she will listen to me over him is if she's upset at him because he hasn't spent enough time with her.

The dynamic between my dog, my boyfriend and I is quite actually a love triangle. Travis is jealous of all the attention I give to my dog at times (I have heard a form of the phrase "You love your dog more than you love me"....this is why I say Travis is deep down, really a girl). I am jealous of the attention she gives to him, and she is jealous of the attention he gives to me (if we're sitting next to each other, she has to sit between us...if there's not a space, she makes one or stands on our legs and in our faces until one of us moves over). If he picks me up into the air, she feels like she has to get in on the action by humping one of us.

Anyone who doesn't believe animals have feelings has got to see my dog in action sometime. I need to reiterate the fact that I do have a child. I have to make sure to not be away from home more than one night, even if someone else is there with her, because she will give me the cold shoulder. If we are at my parent's house, Zoey will completely ignore my mother and me if we are paying attention to Searra, their dog, or if she is even just lying by us. It's quite a funny sight to witness because I can be sitting next to Zoey, calling her name and her ears won't even twitch. She pouts just like a five year old. It can be quite infuriating at times.

My dad swears he hates cats. I always say this with a wink and a bit of sarcasm because my mom and I don't believe him. For years (probably eleven of her fourteen years of life) he threatened that he was

going to throw Pepper out of the house. "I hate that damned cat!" was heard nearly every day. And, if you've ever had a cat, you would know that cats instantly know who doesn't like them and focus all of their attention on that person. My cat would try to lie on my dad's lap every night, and year by year, she worked herself into a position on his legs. Of course, we'd still hear, "I hate that damned cat!" but it became less and less believable. Eventually, it got to the point where we'd hear that line in the afternoon and "Hey Pep, are you ready to go to bed? Are you? Well get in there and get comfortable!" in the evening. Yes, Mr. Cranky Contre Kitty himself had the cat go to bed with him nearly every night for a couple of years. However, he's currently back to hating the cat because Dad's claustrophobic and my cat is not only cuddly but huge. She still thinks she's supposed to sleep with him and scratches and meows at his door every night. Eventually she'll condescend to sleeping with someone else, but if she has a chance at getting in the bedroom to sleep him...bam! You've never seen a fat cat rocket until you saw her run after dad or food.

As of right now, my parents have a Brittany spaniel (Searra...dad wanted to name her Skipper because of the boat. I put my foot down all the way from France and backed my mom on a NO for that one. We settled on "Sierra" or so I thought. Apparently my mom thought spelling her name "SEA"rra was cute. If you can't tell, I think it's ridiculous. Her excuse is the pedigree certificate and to avoid any problems with names.



I'll bet she doesn't even have the papers to GET documentation, and the dog's nearly two). I have Zoey, who is six years old. My parents got her for me for Christmas of my junior year of high school. Keep that in mind—THEY PICKED HER OUT and IT WAS THEIR IDEA. My dad vowed after my second year of college that when I got out of the dorms, I was going to find an apartment that allowed pets and would get that damned dog out of the house. NOW, if you are going to complain about how much fur a dog has, and you know it's going to be a problem, WHY would you pick out such a damned furry dog for your child? Granted, my house at home wasn't big enough for Zoey, but it's not her fault that we eat off dinner trays at meals and her head and tail are taller than them.

Part of the problem with my dad and Zoey is that she's not Cheyanne, who was our first and best dog. Sometimes Chey was more of my dad's pride and joy than I was. Chey was the type of dog that you only have once in a lifetime. My dad's friend found her on the median of a really busy street, and brought her to us. I was a year and a half old. I don't know if I have ever personally witnessed a smarter dog. We used to play soccer outside together almost every night; I'd kick the ball to her and she'd bat the ball in between her paws a few times before letting it go back in my direction.

Probably the best part about Cheyanne was that she always somehow knew the boundaries of wherever she was. If we were camping,

she wouldn't leave the campsite. When we moved, she never once tried to leave the yard and didn't have to be told how far she could go from the house. She didn't like to be far away from any of us; along those lines, I have never seen a more protective animal. When I was three or four, I switched seats with one of my dad's friends. He made the mistake of pretending to attack me, and she bit him without hesitation. If any one of us ever screamed or sounded like we were in trouble, she was there ready to protect us with everything she had.

The day that she died is still one of the worst days of my life. It was the last day before spring break my freshman year of high school. I had missed my bus, which wasn't necessarily an unusual thing. About ten minutes after I should have left, my mom and I were getting ready to leave, and I looked over at Chey to say goodbye. And I screamed at what I saw. We think she had a stroke, because her body was bent in half and she was starting to drool excessively. I went ahead to school, even though all I could do was cry. Mom called me during French class to let me know that there was nothing the vet could do to save her, so Chey had to be put to sleep. It tore us all apart. For months afterwards I would hear the click of her toes on the kitchen floor and forget she was gone. I wrote a really cheesy poem to try to make myself feel better; I'm not really sure how much good it did, because I still can't read it without bawling by the third line. Ordinarily I don't mind being late for class, but

I would give anything not to have that last image of Cheyanne burned in my mind.

Pets have always been an important feature of my family's lives. My mom's the cat woman; my dad swears he hates cats. My dad's the dog person. Me, I'm an any pet person except for snakes, spiders, and other creepy crawlies. There has never been a point in my life that we haven't had both a cat and at least one dog. My grandparents on my dad's side have always had poodles (heaven forbid Nana should have a pet that sheds...cause, you know, licking people constantly and yipping are so much MORE attractive features...). My grandma has had three different dogs in the last ten years, and swears after every one this is her last dog. But my family just doesn't like being alone enough to go without pets sleeping in our beds. My poor children are probably going to think I'm the worst mother ever because I baby my animals so much, and I can hear them in my head whining, "Mom loves the dog more than me!" My pets are spoiled, but I don't feel bad about that one bit. I have a firm belief that domesticated animals have the same rights as a five year old...except that the pets are usually more well-behaved and cleaner!



Me and Zoey in the backyard. (1998)



Cheyenne, Dad's baby. (between 1985 and 1987)



My father and I with one of his many beagles. This is Phoenix, who was rarely inside, so I'm not sure why the only pictures we have of her are in the house....

## Afterword

My family's quirks have been a big item that I've had problems coming to terms with as I've gotten older. My family isn't who I'd like them to be, and they bring out characteristics in myself that I don't like-- in fact, they bring out the worst in me. I don't know why my dad has to be so belligerent, why my grandma is so neurotic, why my aunt is an alcoholic, why my mom has no backbone, and why I'm the contradictory mélange of family traits that I dislike the most. I'm trying to stop searching for why, and find acceptance. This, however, is a step that I don't know if I'll be able to take. I want to create a family that will be mine... one of my own making, one that I can throw my family's bah-humbugness out the window, one that will create the idea of warmth instead of frigidity. One that I will be able to say I'm proud to be a part of.

Writing this thesis brought up several issues that I didn't really want to confront but needed to. Since having started reflecting on some of the issues with my father and me, I have been able to put some of it behind me. The anger and pain have lessened, and I'm having an easier time enjoying being around he and my mother. We still have a lot of differences that create problems, but it feels like that fact is something we are both accepting. A person can only be mad about something for so long before it becomes a moot point.

I hope that anyone reading this thesis will be able to relate to some of the topics I have discussed and that maybe it has helped him or her think about their own family in a more positive light. This thesis wasn't planned to just help me work out some demons; it should also help others realize that they're not alone with some of the problems that they may have with their own families.

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